

## WHICH CAME FIRST, THE THAMES VALLEY WINDSOR OR THE EGG?

This magnificent stick chair from Caernarfonshire in North Wales is a friend of mine. It stands today alongside an open hearth in the Museum of Welsh Life at St Fagans. Everyone who enters the room is drawn towards it, and if lucky they are invited to sit down. With an enveloping back carved from a naturally shaped branch and unusually high sides, it is an extremely comfortable and well-designed chair. It is one of a number in the National Collection, all differing slightly in their proportions and decorative flourishes.



**Fig. 15 Museum of Welsh Life, St Fagans, Cardiff**

The Museum dates them as late 18th century, but they could actually be from almost any period. They are of a type with a very ancient lineage, and 12th century manuscripts show officials of the Welsh Court sitting on chairs constructed in a similar manner. It came as no surprise therefore to see this particularly fine specimen illustrated in the Introduction to Nancy Goyne-Evans' treatise "The American Windsor Chair". But the context and date given certainly did cause surprise, and some bewilderment.

She considers that '*...such chairs represent local carpenters' and handymen's late interpretations of stylish eighteenth century Windsor prototypes*'.

This is the familiar paradigm that nothing can be made in the 'remote' countryside until it has been thought of by a clever designer in the city (of course a suitably lengthy period must then be added for the idea to reach the remote area). There is no easy answer to this: it either makes sense to you, or it makes you smile. It probably depends on whether you come from a city.

Goyne-Evans dates these chairs between 1850 and 1880 because of the use in this example of spindles with multiple

ring turnings, which she believes were not introduced into furniture design until 1850. On this basis she claims that,

*'With these chairs the story of English (sic) Windsor furniture comes full circle; they seem to typify the beginning, when in reality they signify the end'.*

To use one element found on one chair to denigrate a whole tradition is open to many objections. But if we take this feature we find that it is actually all around us in Wales, from 17th century applied mouldings to early 19th century dresser legs. Spindles identical to those on the chair are found along the top of panelled pews in Radnorshire, one of which is dated 1728. They were also used on a number of wooden church candelabra bearing 18th century dates. And of course they are integral to the design of the great 16th and 17th century turned chairs which abound in Wales. Such decoration is in fact so basic that it was used on stools and spinning wheels made by generations of craftsmen who had not the slightest interest in formal furniture design. The practice of categorising items on the basis of the first appearance of their features in fashionable furniture works well for fashionable furniture. But it is wholly inadequate for 'regional' furniture, and we need to develop relevant alternatives. The sequence of mass-produced urban chair designs is not an appropriate context in which to judge rural craftsmanship. I sincerely hope that one day Nancy Goyne-Evans finds the time to rest in this chair, when hopefully she will see that there is nothing 'deceptive' about its 'ancient quality'.

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